The Magic of the Small Screen: Video Games as Cinema

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The artistic scope and vision of video games has changed dramatically in just the last 30 years. Once confined to the domain of penny arcades and amusement parks, video games are now one of the world's most widely used entertainment and technology sectors. Gaming today is as much a global hobby as it is both a source of artistic expression as well as competitive sport.

And with its growing stature has also come an increased creativity and sophistication. Games today are comprehensive productions, the result of years of work from specialized gaming studios. The resulting products are often grand in scale and scope, not unlike other art forms in film, literature, or music. In fact, one of the most recurring gaming trends over the last decade has been its increasingly cinematic qualities.

When it comes to its presentation, visual quality, or musical experience, many of today's games could rightfully be considered as pieces of extended cinema.

Visual Innovations and Star-Studded Storylines

Visual graphics have always been an important component of the gaming experience and perhaps one of the sectors in which the most progress has been made. The crude and rudimentary computer-generated imagery of early games has quickly been replaced with increasingly realistic and polished visual representations.

Games such as *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and *Microsoft Flight Simulator* have dazzling visuals and graphics that could compete with the top animation studios in cinema.

It's not just in graphics that games are increasingly competing with movies and TV shows. They're also grabbing more and more celebrities for voice acting roles. Such as Giancarlo Esposito in *Far Cry 6*, or Jack Black and Elijah Wood in *Psychonauts 2*. Many games today feature casts that rival movie making studios in terms of star power and name recognition.

Sounds of the Symphony

If early video games had a distinct visual look, the same could definitely be said of their music as well. Whether it was the first few *Mario* games, or the original *Halo: Combat Evolved*, video game music had a distinctive sound. Much of it came from the limited instrumentation available at the time, as well as the popularity of MIDI's in video game composing.

But as games progressed, so did their musical scores. The nostalgic chip music of the 90's was replaced by a rapidly diversifying array of gaming scores. Games today often feature immersive neo-classical scores such as the *Call of Duty* series, or music that directly plays a role in the games function like 2021's indie hit *The Artful Escape*.

Gaming has also emerged as an exciting destination for both established and up and coming composers. Michael Giacchino, the winner of both multiple *Grammys* as well as an *Oscar*, has composed multiple video game scores including for the *Medal of Honor* series. And Sarah Schachner, who helped arrange the score for *Iron Man 3* and *The Expendables 2*, has scored games in the *Assassin's Creed* series.

New Narrative Perspectives and Cinematic Presentation

Another cinematic element in gaming today is the presence of story-based games that treat the user more as an active member of the audience, rather than the principal driver of the game's outcome. *Life is Strange*, *Firewatch*, and *Oxenfree* all feature elements that the player controls, but the main purpose of the game is not to "beat it" or achieve some sort of high score, but rather to engage with a rich and engrossing storyline.

Finally, even the very presentation of games has taken on an distinct cinematic quality. Game launches have turned into events filled with potential teasers, press commentary, and full-length trailers that seek to emotionally resonate with viewers rather than provide any meaningful preview of gameplay mechanics or elements. For instance, the trailer for the

upcoming game *Starfield* contained no gameplay and instead was virtually indistinguishable from a science fiction film or TV series.

As games continue to mature and develop as cultural icons and artistic mediums, it’s not surprising that they’ve drawn inspiration from other art forms such as literature and cinema. What are some of your favorite games that have drawn ideas from cinema? Let us know in the comments below!